

Chapter 1

GISELE'S STORY OF HOPE

Our first story is from Gisele B., the founder of EDA. In 1999, after years of trying to recover on her own, Gisele sought help for her eating disorder at a treatment center in Phoenix, Arizona. Inpatient treatment was not an option for a single mother who lacked insurance, but a resource at the center suggested that Gisele attend one of their facilitated self-help groups for eating disorders recovery. Annette, EDA member number three,¹ began attending that same group in November 1999, and she and Gisele bonded over their experiences. Though still struggling with her eating disorder, Annette was grateful to be sober through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and she encouraged Gisele to give AA a shot. Gisele soon found sobriety and became inspired to start a group like AA for people with eating disorders. Annette wasn't too keen on the idea at first, having just arrived at the conclusion that abstinence-based approaches to eating disorders recovery were ineffective. But Gisele was determined: she started the first EDA group in February 2000 with practically no support at all.

Gisele's courage and determination—and her willingness to be true to herself—created EDA. Never let it be said that you cannot make a difference; Gisele's example proves

¹ Joanie, a friend of Gisele's through AA, was EDA member number two. Joanie stayed with us for the first few years then moved to a state that did not have any EDA groups, at a time when EDA did not have phone or online meetings. At last contact, Joanie was doing well with the support of her AA group.

you can. EDA exists because of her bravery. We are honored to present the story of her journey in recovery.

My story starts out pretty much like everyone else's. I came from a dysfunctional family and all that it entails. My recovery began when I realized I was becoming exactly like my mom. It was my worst nightmare. I felt lost.

My mom was often violent; I pictured her as a monster. She controlled every aspect of my life and I grew up feeling like *I did not exist*. From the outside, I guess we looked like a normal family, but later I discovered all sorts of skeletons in the closet. My dad was a "don't make waves, don't rock the boat" kind of man. He would stuff his emotions inside, except every now and then, he would just *explode*. Looking back on it now, I can laugh at some of the horrible things that happened in my family, but at the time it was a miserable existence.

Until I was seven years old, we lived on a ranch in Colorado. I had two older brothers. That sounds a bit like the setting for a great Western novel, but it was not the idyllic *Bonanza* family my dad wanted. It took me a long time to accept that my parents did the best they could with what they had. I was told I did not speak until I was five years old. I thought I just had nothing to say to these people, but there were some actual reasons for that: I was raped by a babysitter and molested by my oldest brother before we left the ranch. This caused, shall we say, a few problems.

When I was seven, we moved to Olympia, Washington. I thought we moved because my dad lost the ranch, but the real reason was because my mom was having an affair and would not stop. Now I can see that the dysfunction in my family was a cycle my parents both inherited from

their own families, but this insight was no help to me as a child! My strongest memory of those early years is that I was alone—and I mean really alone with no one around—much of the time. The only one who paid me much attention was my oldest brother, who teased me a lot.

When I got to school, I did not fit in for a couple reasons. First of all, I went to a special speech class that made me feel dumb and different. Throughout the years I've had a stammer and problems with speaking. Now I know this wasn't because I was stupid; I'd had problems from not talking or learning how to communicate at an early age. I also didn't fit in because of the way I thought about myself: from as far back as I can remember I just wanted to die. I have had to turn thoughts of suicide, which I called my "safety net," over to God: I had to ask for the obsession to be taken away.

Growing up, I did everything I could to escape my home life. I'm sure we looked normal from the outside—my brothers and I were well-behaved church-goers. The church was very legalistic and controlling. What people didn't see was what happened at home if we misbehaved. I was always involved in sports, which allowed me to eat as much as I wanted. But later I realized that I had always had a horrible image of myself and tried to escape in every way I could. I believe my eating disorder and my alcoholism started when I was in my early teen years. Which appeared first really doesn't matter; I had the "isms," which meant for me, everything I touched would turn on me.

I left my parents' house at age seventeen, while in a screaming fight with mom. I guess I thought that leaving would make my life finally start and that I would somehow know what to do next. But for the next few years, all I did was to jump from place to place, and party to party. I had

absolutely no plan for my life at all. A lot can happen to a single, young female—and it did, including three more rapes.

I moved to Alaska because I found a job that paid well. I didn't know at the time that moving to get away from my problems was what they call "a geographic" in AA, but I discovered the same thing everyone else does: wherever you go, there you are! In Alaska, when I wasn't working I was drinking and smoking pot, and my bulimic behavior started. Then, about three months into my Alaska "adventure," I received a call. Drew, the only person I thought knew me and loved me had committed suicide. I went home for the funeral, but I couldn't stay and "deal," so I went back to Alaska to finish my contract.

Soon after, I went through what I think of as my first psychotic break. I drank more, smoked more, and binged and purged more. I was a wreck! I began hallucinating. My behavior changed. I stole from work and from the store where we all shopped. Another gal and I were hanging out with a bunch of safe guys, but then I decided to pick out this long-haired, blonde guy for myself—a guy my age (all of nineteen!) that everybody seemed to want—and he played along. I also remember getting into fights with other women at that time, but I don't remember much about that period. I would "come to" with blood on me, my hands swollen and beaten up. We were all just a bunch of misfits.

Then, when I left the bar after one of my nights spent partying, I was followed and raped by the bouncer. I did not report it because I figured no one would believe me. Not long after, I got caught stealing, was fired from my job in Alaska, and reluctantly returned to my hometown.

I stayed with a friend, who took me to see a doctor. I don't remember the purpose for the visit, but I sure remember the news: I was three months pregnant. I was scared

and didn't know what to do, but I decided to keep the baby. I had been drinking and smoking in that first trimester and I wasn't sure if the baby's father was the rapist or the blonde guy. To say the least, my pregnancy was hardly a happy time! But having my daughter was a blessing, even though I did not know it yet. I know God gave me my daughter so I would slow down and stay alive long enough to "get it." I still continued to party a bit, though I did my best to be a good mom. I tried to do and be what everyone thought I should do and be.

The first choice I made entirely on my own was when my daughter was still in diapers: I decided to fix my problems by doing another "geographic" to Arizona. I just could not stay around my family any longer. My insides would twist when my mom held my daughter, and I knew things would end up horribly if I stayed. There was one family I knew who moved to Arizona and they said I could stay with them. So I packed up the two of us, sold everything, gave my car (a white-with-red-interior Maverick) to my dead friend's little sister, and moved to Arizona. I continued to do my best as a mom and take care of us. I even tried individual therapy and medications, but I was not making much headway—my addictions were starting to rule my life.

My parents drove truck for a living at that time, and sometimes when they came into town on a delivery we would go to dinner together. Once, because I thought it would help, I confronted them about my brother molesting me. They told me I was crazy and swept the secret back under the rug, stomping it down for good measure to be sure no light or air could get underneath! I lost hope of ever resolving my issues. My drinking and my eating disorder both got worse and began to affect every aspect of my life.

When I tried to slow down the smoking and drinking, I got out of control with my bulimia. It ended up in a vicious cycle. It got so bad I thought I would be found dead hugging the toilet, my heart given out.

I know this all sounds horrible, and it was, but I bring up the past because I want people who are as desperate as I was to *have hope*. I have learned no matter what background you come from or what you have been through, there is hope for change. I had to do two things: keep talking about it and find someone or something to change my perception of myself and my life. When I started doing the best I could in my recovery, my life did change. It was slow going, but life did get better!

My recovery began when I realized I was about ready to start beating my daughter. My anger and rage got so bad! Up to that point, I had always buried my feelings, my life, and who I was. And now I was exploding, turning into the monster I had feared in my mom. I didn't realize how miserable I was. My grand idea was to send my daughter away, and probably die with the direction I was going. That made no sense because I loved her more than life—but I was so confused! I called a local treatment center and went in for a consultation.

I could not be admitted because I had no insurance and no one to watch my daughter. However, they did get me into a group meeting of other people with eating disorders, which is where I met Annette. The group itself was not very productive, but Annette and I got to talking, and she invited me to my first AA meeting. I was high when I went; it was the best I could do at the time. I have to say, my connection with Annette was not an accident, and I will forever be grateful for her.

I continued with AA and found recovery from my alcoholism, but it wasn't helping me with my eating disorder. I kept struggling! Although I started to recognize the different addictions to be all one disease, I could not seem to make the AA program work for my bulimia. I knew that other groups for people with addictions were sprouting off of the AA "Big Book," so I decided to go ahead and start a group for my eating disorder.

I went to the Board at the AA fellowship hall where I went to my AA meetings, and I picked a name, a room, a time, and a format. I put up signage and started announcing EDA—Eating Disorders Anonymous—at AA meetings. I was scared, but I figured, *I can't be the only one struggling with this problem*. I needed to try *something*, because I felt like I was dying from my disease. Turns out, I wasn't alone. People did start coming in, though slowly at first. We used a format adapted from my AA meetings with some changes in wording. The group started getting regular attendees. Annette was very supportive, and together we started discussing where it might go from there.

Our support for each other— not being alone in our disease—made a big difference. Annette has a business background and she really took off on the organizational end, getting our own Board set up and recruiting members to start more EDA groups. Even as we were figuring out how to get recovery we were assembling EDA from nuts and bolts. I was a little scared the organizational side of things was growing too fast while we were still struggling with building and maintaining recovery, although I look back now and can say it happened just like it was supposed to. At the time, however, I was scared EDA was running away from what I wanted it to be. I was still unhealthy in my disease and I couldn't speak up or say what I wanted

because, frankly, I still didn't know what that was. Nor did I know what would work for recovery, but I believe God was with us through the entire process.

Our program actually started growing. I was excited; we had pamphlets, formats, and new meetings sprouting up. It was slow, but I did start getting recovery from my bulimia. The first time I remember bingeing and throwing up was in Alaska, so I had been bulimic for about fifteen years. I never thought in a million years I would be able to stop! It was hard, because with my alcoholism, I could abstain from alcohol, but when it came to food, I still had to eat! I stayed with EDA for a long time, but because of resentments and warped thinking, I walked away for a while. I focused on my daughter, Alcoholics Anonymous, and tried more therapy. Before I knew it, I had not practiced my bulimia for about ten years. But I was still having trouble with feelings and emotions and not knowing who I was or what I wanted to be when I grew up!

When my daughter graduated high school and joined the Air Force, I had to take a good, hard look at myself. She had been my rock and the reason I was in any kind of recovery at all. But I know now that whatever the reason was for *starting* in recovery, I *stayed* because life was better with it than what I knew I would fall back into without it. Without recovery I had no value or purpose but now I thought, *Wow. I might actually have a chance; life might be ok.* There is such timing in what happened in my life; I can see how God has used everything to get me where I am today!

I didn't understand it at the time, but my mom's death a few years ago is an example of how God keeps showing me what I need to learn. I had a choice: I could continue living in the past, *or I could do something different.*

Through the years I kept trying to have a relationship with my mom. I just wanted explanations for why she treated me like she did. I felt hated, and I wanted her to apologize. My expectations were *nuts* given who she was and how she saw things, but I could not see this yet. So when she died, I was left with a big pile of resentments and no answers. When I went back for the funeral, I got in a big fight with my dad and left with even more resentments than I came with. I was handling things the best I could, but got caught off guard and went into a tailspin. My eating disorder returned, only this time I was using anorexia to deal with my emotions. It was a gradual process, and by the time I realized what was happening, I was extremely underweight and stuck in anorexic thinking and habits.

Then someone from EDA came back into my life, which, again, I am sure was God-inspired. We were able to be honest with each other about where we were in our lives and with our eating disorders. By talking to her and getting honest with myself, I could see the truth, and it was not good. I certainly was not dealing with emotions and feelings well at all! Despite my shame and anger, I did eventually accept help. I had some wonderful friends who wanted me to get better and who were very supportive. I got out my toolbox from what I had learned, but I needed more. So I went back to EDA meetings and also to an eating disorder therapist, who put me in touch with a nutritionist. It was difficult to go to meetings because I had not been involved for so long. But I was more scared of my disease than ever because of how it snuck up on me.

Even though it was a difficult process, I am glad now that I went through my disease a second time. There were things I was missing in my recovery that I discovered by experiencing that joy all over again. I was still a victim,

wanting someone or something else to blame. I kept hearing the voice of a southern woman in AA who would say, “Nothing happens in God’s world by mistake.” She was right! When I look back, I see God working all the way through my life, in good times and bad. As a result of getting honest and working through the thinking habits that led me back to my eating disorder, I gained a stronger recovery—and so much more!

It was no longer good enough to be a *survivor*; I wanted *freedom*! I got into service and took a group of ladies through a “Big Book” study. I got so much more out of it that way: I gained recovery from my eating disorder and a new friend who is now my life partner. I also started seeing another therapist who was perfect for me. I was finally ready—desperate enough to want to get out of my denial. This was the hardest time in my recovery, because I was looking at the real me. Between my therapist and my friend, I was able to process differently, and could see exactly who I was. In my desperation I would ask, “Why ME?” My friend answered me quite simply, “Why not!” This made something inside click, and I suddenly had a choice.

When I was seven and we moved from Colorado to Washington, my parents decided to find a church. This is where man’s interpretation of God put some warped ideas and legalistic views in my life. When I was in my teens, I had a crush on a friend who was a girl, but I denied it because our church condemned homosexuality. I tried to be “normal” and have boyfriends, but those relationships never worked out. In my late twenties, I tried a few lesbian relationships, but I was still so unhealthy that those didn’t work out either. One of my partners was committed to working for LGBT rights, but that wasn’t the fight I wanted at the time. I just wanted to be myself and be in a relation-

ship. I continued to question. I would wonder if I felt the way I did because of the rapes and molestation, or because of who I was. In therapy, I finally worked it out when my therapist said, "Why does it matter? Just be who you are. It doesn't matter if the chicken or the egg comes first." When I finally did come out, people weren't surprised. My daughter just said, "Well, that makes sense!" and ended up being really supportive. She just wanted me to be happy and find someone to love.

Accepting my sexuality, which had been a struggle since my teenage years, has been a huge freedom and load off my back. Because of how the church made God out to be a hateful, condemning, vengeful God, and my own worries about what people were going to think—there was an enormous barrier between me and God. Now that I have accepted myself for who I am, my relationship with God has changed completely; my perception of Him has totally changed. I used to picture Him as this judgmental, black-and-white presence that commanded what I should be and do. I am so grateful I've been able to let God out of the box!

I started exploring different ideas about God and forms of spirituality, and now I believe that God—the same God I knew as a child—isn't just one Being, defined by one group of humans. Some of my readings have helped me come to an understanding that God is a term for a special kind of energy. Native American cultures also have this unifying idea: that natural things—the sky and rocks and trees—have value in a spiritual sense. My relationship with God is still evolving, and I want it to evolve. Just like my recovery, I want my relationship with God to grow.

I also believe that everyone is on their own journey and that we explore and grow in our own perfect time. I wish people could see God, or spirit, or whatever with open

eyes. I think we are all spiritual beings living a human existence. I believe religion is manmade, and that God didn't intend for us to get bogged down, but to seek Him spiritually. Having happiness and freedom and sharing this with each other is a great place to be. But when we get stuck on details about what we should be and do, we are going to have trouble. Recovery can't be built on top of a rigid, fear-based foundation: we have to break free from it!

When we started EDA, we discovered it was going to be about finding balance and perspective, not abstinence, in the midst of life. That takes time and patience; it is not going to come together all at once. During my day, I would start having little moments where I thought, *It might be ok!* You may have some "Aha!" moments and probably see some thinking patterns begin to shift long before you see your eating-disordered behavior change in a major way. This is ok, because it's part of the foundation on which recovery is built. You may not even recognize that you are in recovery until you begin to notice you are responding differently to the things that used to set you on edge. For me, I'd be working on some major issue, then realize all of a sudden that lots of little issues had worked themselves out just fine. Don't waste energy on things that aren't that important, like quibbling with yourself about what you ate for breakfast or worrying about what others think of you. If you get stuck on the little things, you might not work on the big things. That's exactly where your disease wants you: it knows what each of your little things are, and it is going to use those to prevent your recovery. Don't let it fool you: you've got a choice!

The big things that need and deserve attention include: finding the positive, focusing on gratitude, and hav-

ing respect for what actually may be going right with us, the people in our lives and—let's go even bigger—*the world* (because it does not revolve around me!). That is something I had to learn along the way. If I focus my attention on the negative, that is what I am going to get. If I focus my attention on the positive, I can find the power to do things that matter. Gratitude is an action word: I have to act on it! If I am focusing on the positive, I am going to get more gratitude, more power, and more joy.

When I started respecting myself more, I started wanting better for myself. I got a decent job. I have good, healthy relationships in my life, including a partner who loves and respects me—amazing! My daughter and I have a good relationship and I get to decide what type of relationship to have with the rest of the family. I don't have to have a relationship with everyone: I can pick and choose. We can't be all things to all people.

It takes time to decipher what we really need to fully recover. What works for others may or may not work for you. Be patient! Keep things simple and keep moving. Respect yourself and your efforts to find recovery. Keep taking small risks, building trust with yourself, and focusing on the bigger picture: you will walk free if you work at it.

Some ideas that help me find balance and perspective, and maintain my recovery:

- **Do first things first.** Take care of basics and prioritize by what matters in the long run.
- **Do one thing at a time.** A day at a time is too much for us, especially in early recovery!
- **Be true to yourself, be honest, and be kind.** Integrity builds recovery.

- **Be at peace.** Recovery is not a box that you fit your life into: it is open and free. That doesn't mean everything is grand in your life, it means you can live in peace *no matter what*. Get past the idea that things are happening to you or because of you—they are just happening!
- **Forget about counting days and years of recovery.** Recovery is not about days, or months, or years. You can have years of “recovery” and still be rigid and stuck. Recovery is an inside job: you know you are there when you are at peace with food and in balance in other areas of your life.
- **Do what is in front of you. Keep it simple!** Remember we have to take care of basics before we can do much else: if hungry, eat; if angry, find a safe outlet; if lonely, reach out; if tired, sleep; if ashamed, talk about it.
- **Lighten up—don't take life so seriously!** In our eating disorders, we spent so much time afraid and alone—lost in ourselves—that we lost the joy in life. Recovery means finding humor. Laughing at myself reduces shame and puts things back in perspective. It's not all about me, which is easier to see when I laugh and find joy. Everybody has insecurities. We get so busy looking at ourselves and our deficiencies we forget how good it feels to share our experience of life.
- **Do the work.** In the “doing” comes the understanding and the recovery: we have to do the work. We take the Steps to change the way we think. When we change the way we think, we get

options to change what we do. When we take the right actions, we start getting the right results. Not feeling “up to it” today? Ask yourself what you would do if you felt better—and then do it.

- **Focus on the positive, and seek balance in everything.** Balance to me means asking, *Where am I focusing my energy?* Then, I work on putting my energy where it matters. For instance, at work recently, I was using up way too much energy on the negative by arguing with people. It was draining! I had to remember that whatever I give out is what I get back. So I changed my attitude and perspective, which changed the dynamic completely—and I got my peace back.
- **Keep taking stock of where you are and respond accordingly.** I sometimes forget to take care of the simple things. I have to recognize that when my food and sleep get sideways, I have to change what I am thinking and doing to make sure I take care of myself so I can focus on the positive: going to church, going to meetings, talking with my partner and support people, and just doing what’s in front of me.
- **Stay accountable for your thoughts and actions.** Once I got to a point where I did not want my disease to keep me stuck any longer, I started keeping myself accountable for my eating-disordered thoughts and behaviors to my partner and support people. Annette and I used to call this “telling on ourselves,” which can sound like self-shaming, but we laughed a lot. It is amazing how silly our responses to life can be. I mean, there

is humor in admitting that, *Somebody didn't respond like I thought they should when I said something completely stupid, so now I want to shove food in my face. That will totally make it all better!* Come on, people: lighten up! We are only as sick as our secrets!

- **Find gratitude for what you have.** Gratitude is what makes it possible for me to do the things I need to do with love and compassion. I used to pray for the willingness to be willing. Now that comes easily because I experience the Promises; I experience joy every day. It's the simple things.
- **Get into service: it is an important aspect of balance!** When I am too absorbed with myself now, I can usually catch myself and laugh. Sometimes it is easy to forget that there is a whole other existence out there! When it's all about me, life can get awfully miserable. When it's all about what I can do to help others, it's amazing. When I found recovery, I also found empathy. My eyes opened up. Now I can see where people are hurting, and usually there is something right in front of me that I can do to help.

Service doesn't have to mean doing big things; it means being open to see the confusion and pain of others and being willing to take the time to help them. Being open to service may leave you vulnerable, but when I close myself off from others, I miss out on some of the most magical moments. When I put myself on the line, willing to be of service, I get the strength and power to be genuinely helpful. I can help a little old lady find the husband she lost in

the airport. I can talk to the person in the wheelchair who is sitting all alone. It is so much better to have heart! Being of service brings me joy. The more I do even little things to be of service, the more gratitude I have.

For me, seeking balance means reaching out to regain perspective when I am all caught up in negativity. Connecting with people is hard when I'm in physical or emotional pain, but when I speak out loud about my problems with my partner, I can more easily break my issues down into what they usually are: expectations and old thinking. *Then* I can see where I can be helpful.

My life today is by no means a perfect picture, but it does not have to be. The difference is, now I have choices! I have a few physical problems and I sometimes have issues with people where I work. Recently, my adult daughter came home to stay with us for a while, and at first I got caught up in fear. *How were we all going to interact? How would things go with my partner and me? Was my daughter going to live with us the rest of her life? Holy hell!* In the end, I looked at it from her perspective in order to see how to be useful to her—instead of making it about me. Breaking it down, I was able to find gratitude that I could just do the necessary next steps to get things going: setting up a room, finding connections, helping line things up for her.

I have to remember that I can't do it alone. We don't know how to do things until we learn how to do them. It is almost laughable that we have so much shame about things we've never done before. I used to think: *Here I am, thirty years old, I should know how do this!* But if we've never done something before, no matter what age we are, there is no reason why we should expect ourselves to know how to do it. It takes an adult perspective to have humility and admit when we need help.

It is important to remember we are examples to others in our lives. When I accepted shame from my church and mom, and hung onto it, I ended up passing it down to my daughter even though that was the absolute last thing I ever wanted. I kept thinking, *Things are the way they are because of my horrible failures*, instead of thinking—and showing my daughter how to think—about the positives. Now that I am more focused on the positives, I hope that example will carry over!

All I can do right now is what is right here in front of me. I am grateful for the peace and freedom that comes from focusing on doing the next right thing, one thing at a time. I am still powerless over situations in my life today, and if I don't use the tools my life will again become unmanageable. But when I use the tools—the Steps—I can be at peace. I have worth today, and my life has meaning, because it isn't all about me anymore.

If you are just starting on your journey in recovery, work with a sponsor on the first three Steps, the basics of which are, “I can't, He can, and I think I'll let Him.” *We have to keep it simple and keep moving.* Finding a Higher Power or purpose will help you jump into the rest of the Steps, which will bring the Promises into your life. Don't worry about doing things the right or wrong way; just do the next right thing and trust that more will be revealed as you move forward. Don't wait for the “perfect” time. There is none! But you can *make* the perfect time: that time is *right now*.